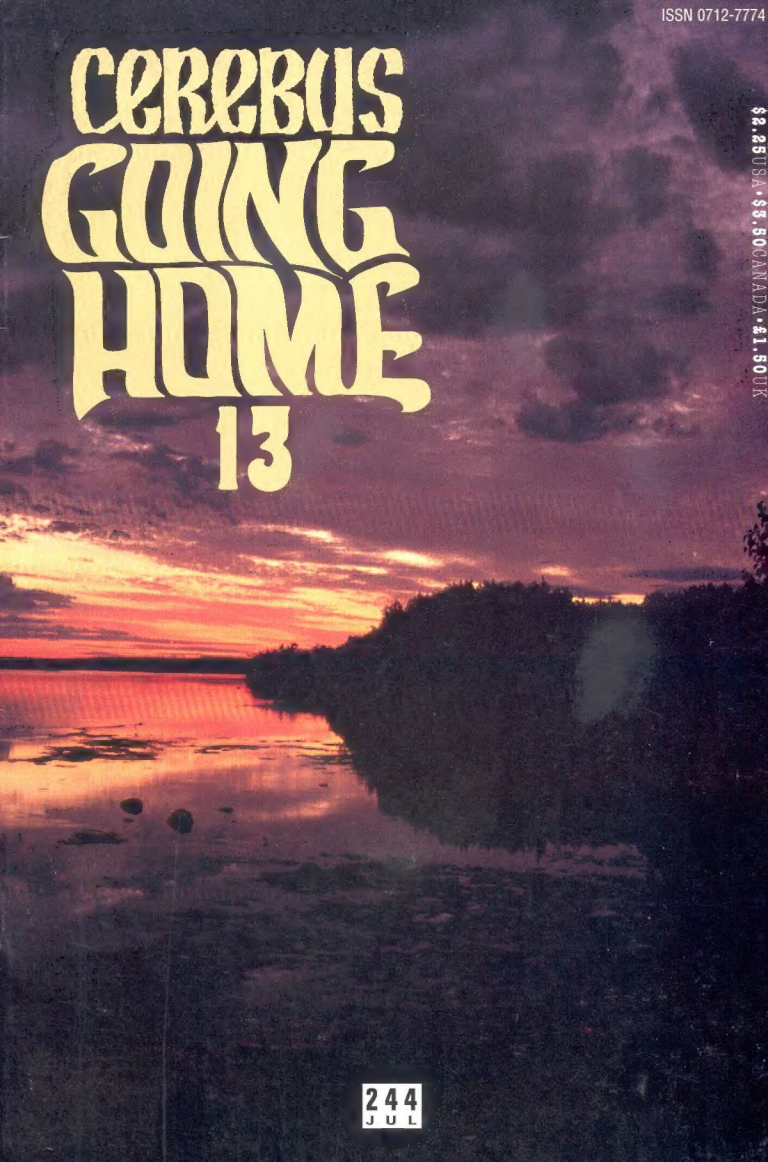
ISSN 0712-7774

CEREBUS

GOING HOME

13

$2.25USA•$3.50CANADA•£1.50UK



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JUL

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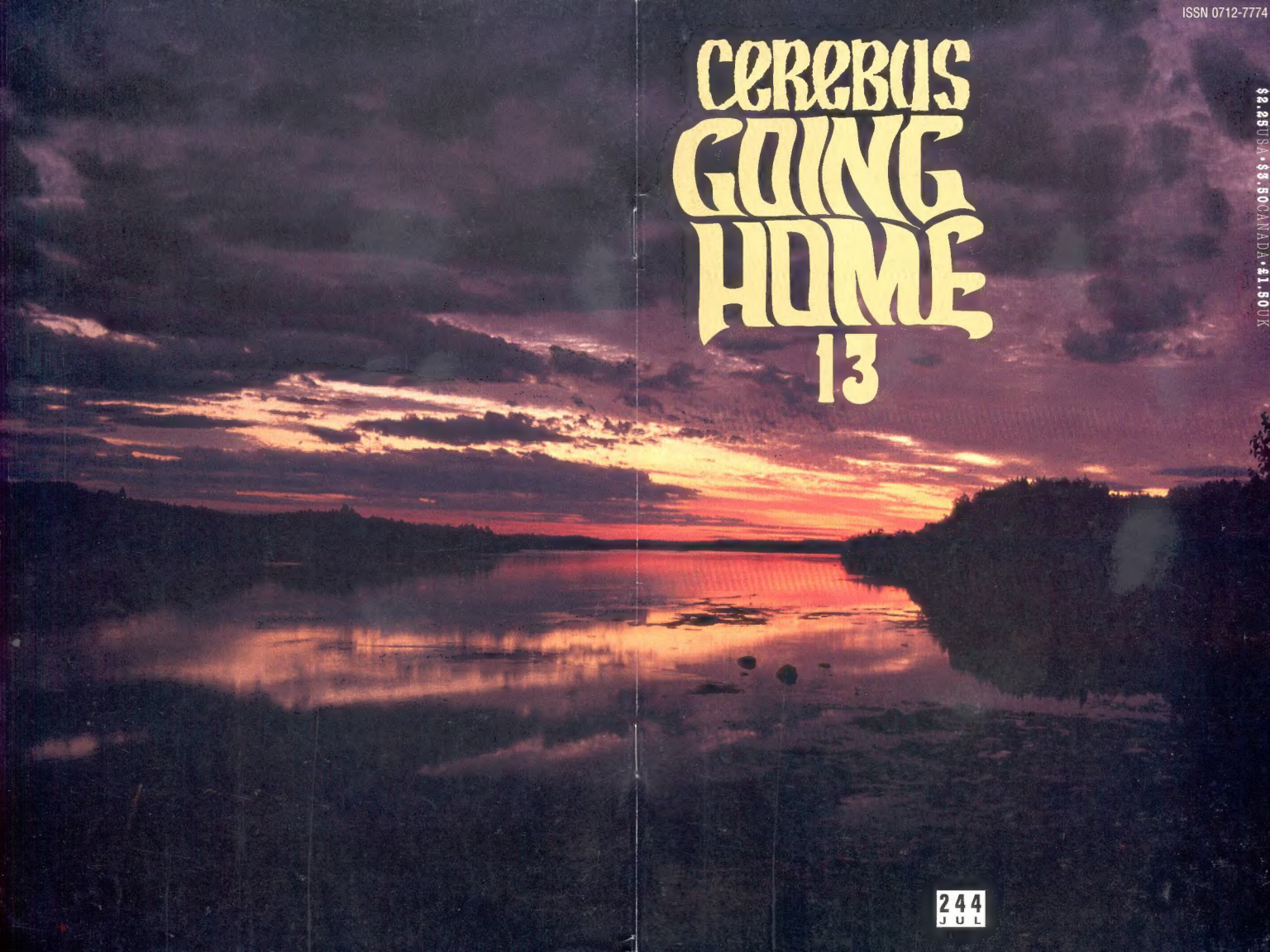

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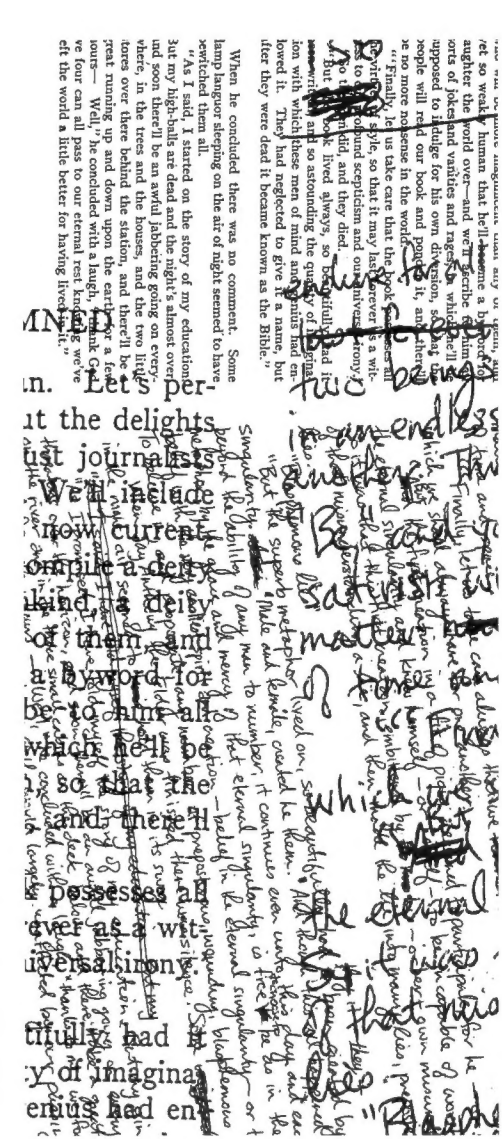

CEREBUS

NO. 244 MAY 1999

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GOING HOME

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BOOK ONE
Sudden Moves
(Cerebus 232 to 239)

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BOOK TWO
Fall and the River
(Cerebus 240 to 250)

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"I think I shall tell myself the story of my education," continued Jay Anthony, "under these beatific heavens."

"Do! Please!"

"Shall I, really?"

He waited expectantly for himself to begin, while his yawn rose to greet the white, sardonic moon.

"Well," he began, "as an infant I seldom prayed. I considered each of my prayers to be a sufficient hedge against the consequences of any number of future iniquities. By the age of my majority, roughly considered, each 'now I lay me' constituted a lone spiritual bulwark against the repercussions of many hundreds of ethically and morally transgressive acts."

"Throw down a gauntlet," murmured some part of himself.

A small Jay Anthony Diver hurtled out of him, plunging to the barge's deck and dividing on impact (in unison with his stern rebuke) into three still smaller beings.

"Silence! I am about to regale myself with many memorable recollections reserved for the darkness of such rivers and the judgement of such skies."

Below, a lighted match passed from cigarette to cigarette. The voice resumed.

"I was adept at courting gods and goddesses. I prayed to each in succession, abandoning each of them in turn when I felt myself to have been abandoned *by* them. I prayed for every triviality that crossed my awareness, until prayer and the trivial became interchangeable to me. I believed because I cried out 'My God!' each time one of my sins returned upon me that belief was rooted

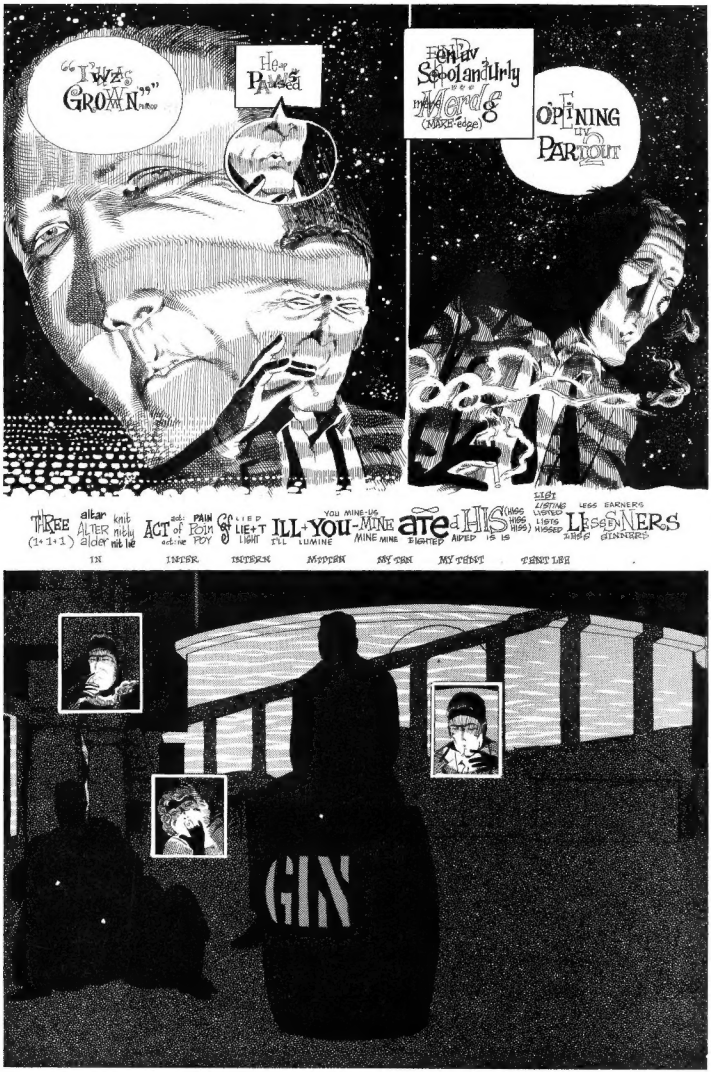
deeply in my soul. Then I went to school. For thirteen years, half a hundred earnest men and women pointed to newly minted philosophies and cried to me, 'There's the real thing. These other intellectual currencies are only worn and degraded precursors.' They damned the books I read and the things I thought by calling them 'masculine'; later the fashion changed, and they damned the same things by calling them misogynistic.

"And so I turned, clever for my years, from the teachers to the storytellers, listening — to the lyric tenor of Gaiman and the tenor robusto of Campbell, to Eisner with his first bass and his fine range, to Moore with his second bass and occasional falsetto, to Miller and Crumb, bassos profundo. I gave ear to Pekar declaiming and Pekar droning.

"This, at least, did me no harm. I learned a little of integrity — enough to know that it had nothing to do with beauty — and I found, moreover, that there existed a great literary tradition, consisting in its entirety of its own successive deaths and subsequent resurrections from individual to individual and generation to generation...

"Then I fell in love, and the savoury lustre of illusions fell away from me. The fibre of my heart coarsened, and my eyes grew miserably keen. Marriage rose around my island like a sea, and presently I was swimming.

"The transition was gradual. The thing had lain in wait within me for some time — an insidious, ostensibly innocuous trap that seemed fundamental to my very being. 'Within me'? Yes — though I still thought myself seductive, and all


"I WZ GROWN"
HE PAUSED
HAV SOOLANDURLY MARKED
OPENING PARTOUT
THREE (1+1+1)
ALTAR ALTER ALDER
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but ran through the streets unclothed, proclaiming my virility, it is never the dress that passion wears which does the business, but passion itself. I became passionately dutiful — that was all. Duty, which is another name and a frequent disguise for virility, became the conscious motive of all my actions. Integrity was behind me, do you understand? I was grown." He paused. "End of school and early marriage. Opening of Part Two."

Three alternately active points of light illuminated his listeners intermittently. Little Xena was now half sitting, half lying in Jay Anthony the Younger's lap. His arm was around her so tightly that she could hear the beating of his heart. Blatchford Symington, perched on his gin barrel, stirred from time to time.

"I was grown into this land of dutiful passion, then, and existed between clearly enunciated confusions. Life stood over me like a stern schoolmistress ordering my passionate thoughts. With a mistaken faith in love, I plodded on. I read Smith, who deplored independence and insisted marriage was the highest form of self-expression — but Smith himself joined marriage as an obscurer of the light. I read Jones, who neatly disposed of leadership — and behold! Jones was attempting to lead me. I did not think — rather I was the battle-ground for the thoughts of many men: one of those desirable but ignorant countries over which the great powers surge back and forth.

"I reached maturity under the impression that I was nurturing monogamous love to order my life for enduring happiness. Indeed, I accomplished the not unusual feat of anticipating all marital conflicts in my mind long before they presented

themselves to me in life — and of being beaten and bewildered just the same.

"After a few tastes of this bitter dish, I had had enough. 'Here!' I said. 'Love is not worth the getting. It's not a thing that grows up pleasantly around a maturing you — it's a wall that an active you runs up against.' So I wrapped myself in what I thought was my unassailable scepticism and decided that my education was complete. But it was too late. Protect myself as I might by neither creating new ties nor reinforcing the old with tragic and predestined womanhood, I was lost with the rest. I had traded the fight against falsehood for the fight against ambiguity, the fight against death for the fight against mere existence."

He broke off to give emphasis to his last observation — after a moment he yawned and resumed.

"I suppose that the beginning of the second phase of my education was a rebellion against knowing I was being used in spite of myself for the inscrutable purpose of some greater being of whose ultimate goal I was unaware — if, indeed, there *was* an ultimate goal. It was a difficult adjustment. The schoolmistress seemed to be saying, 'We're going to play at being dutiful and being nothing but dutiful. If you don't want to play at being dutiful, you can't play at all — '

"What was I to do — the playtime was so short!

"You see, I felt that men were denying themselves the consolation — whatever their mere existence consisted of — that they were a part of Ethical Man endeavouring to rise from his knees.

"How could one not leap at such an optimism? Not grasping at it as a sweetly smug superior

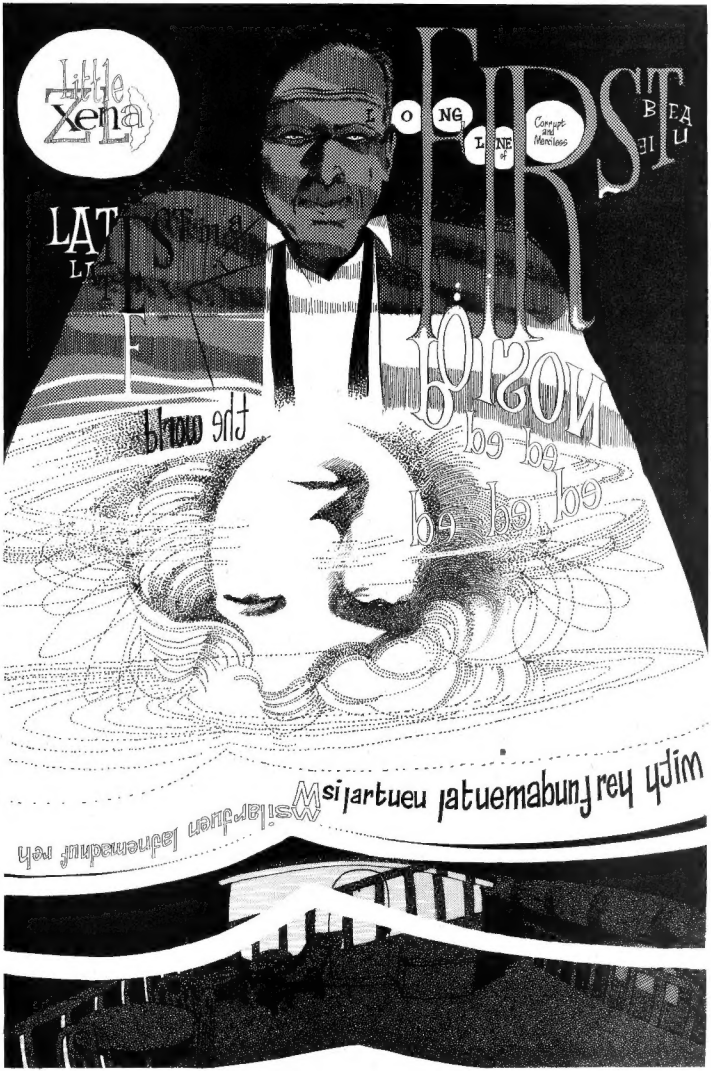
thing, but warming one's self before it: a truth comparable to an open bonfire on a winter's night. I did that. I was just warm enough for that, just alive enough for that.

"For it seemed to me that there *was* an ultimate goal for man. Man was endeavouring to move beyond his grotesque and bewildering rebellion against his own Creator — that divine and magnificent Creator who had allowed us, if we so chose, to willfully oppose him. Had allowed us to invent ways to rid the human race of the 'unnecessary' and thus strengthen the remainder to...what? To demonstrate to ourselves by the painful repercussions of our own rebellious actions that each form of rebellion merely reinforced the Creator's original and conscious lesson to us — that, in seeking to circumvent Him, we merely postpone the actuating of the highest gifts of enlightenment which we seek. In the morass of inversion and turmoil, I saw the evil endeavouring to mingle with the good — in Estarcion there was taking place a spiritual catastrophe to save one matriarchal mastery from the handful of divine inheritances that might organize things for ethical fulfillment.

"We produce a Cirin who can raise up all brides — and presently the bridal species is regarded as our highest achievement. If anyone can find a lesson in that, let him stand forth."

"There's only one lesson to be learned from life, anyway," interrupted Little Xena, not in agreement but in a sort of melancholy contradiction.

"What's that?" demanded Jay Anthony the Elder.


Little Xena
ONE
Corrupt and Merciless
FIRST
LAST
the world

"That there's no lesson to be learned from life."

After a short silence Jay Anthony the Elder resumed:

"Little Xena, latest in a long line of corrupt and merciless beauties, first poisoned the world with her fundamental neutralism which I have struggled to escape; in which Jay Anthony the Younger could perceive no threat: that Little Blatchford Symington celebrated in his work."

There was a disgusted groan from the gin barrel.

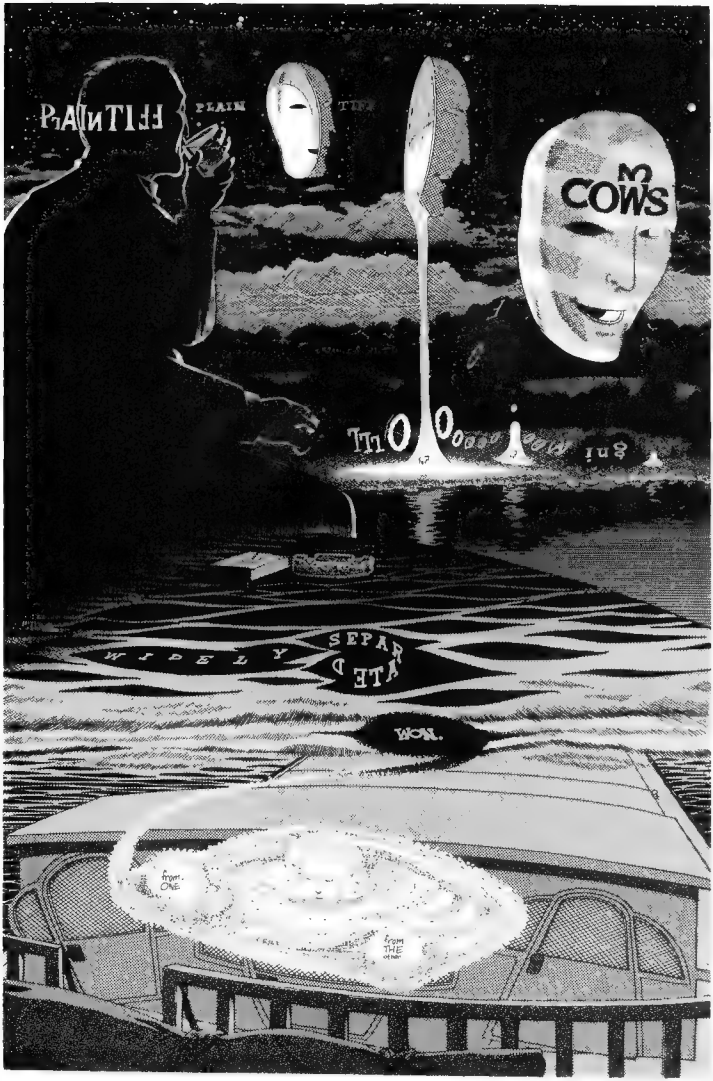
Jay Anthony the Elder, grown accustomed to the dark, could see plainly the flash of Blatchford Symington's crimson eye and the look of resentment on his face as he cried:

"You're crazy! By your own statement I attained something by trying."

"Trying what?" whispered Jay Anthony the Elder. "Trying to merge the darkness of neutralism with the white light of the truth? Sitting day after day in a rigid chair removed from both life and faith, staring at a steeple through the trees and deluding yourself that by your own individual efforts you could separate, definitely and for all time, the knowable from the unknowable? Trying to take a factual circumstance and graft onto it some fanciful insight of your own, as if you might thereby restore to it that inexpressible quality it possessed in life and had lost in transit to paper or canvas?"

"Have *you* attained anything?"

Jay Anthony paused, and in his reply, when it came, there was a measure of spirit, a sweet overnote that lingered for a moment in those three


PLAIN
COWS
WIDELY SEPARATED
MOO.
from ONE
from THE other

incarnations below him before it floated up and off like a butterfly bound for the stars.

"Perhaps." He said softly. "You see, I once aspired to be brilliant and chose, ultimately, to be merely tired. For all my talking and what little listening I have done — my intermittent and vain search for the eternal singularity that seems to lie just beyond every circumstance and every speculation — to that grand enterprise I have added not one jot — save, perhaps, the parenthetical admonition that it is to be attained neither through the mere aspiration to brilliance nor through the choice to be merely tired."

In the distance a deep sound that had been audible for some moments resolved itself into the plaintive lowing of three cows widely separated... one... from one... from another in the pasture beyond the river. As if in reply, the thick timbers of a distant bonfire shifted, sending a stream of sparks and cinders skyward, illuminating a distant point on the horizon.

"Not one jot!" Again Jay Anthony the Elder's voice descended upon his auditors from above. "What a feeble thing our belief in circumstance has proven to be, with its random steps, its waverings, it pacings to and fro, its disastrous retreats. Belief in circumstance is a mere instrument of neutrality — neutralism itself, in fact. There are people who say circumstance must have built the universe — why, circumstance never built so much as an anthill! The eternal singularity built the anthill — and the universe as well. Circumstance, coincidence, happenstance are the names we give to our own rebellions against our Creator — a short glossary of terms by

which we define our seemingly infinite failures of faith.

"I could quote you the philosophy of the day — but, I assure you, a hundred years will see a complete reversal of this abnegation that's absorbing humanity at this present and fleeting hour: the perceived triumph of Cirin over the eternal singularity — " He hesitated and then added: "All that I believe — the pre-eminent importance of the eternal singularity to men, and the necessity to acknowledge this same importance to myself — the lovely and poisonous Xena was born deprecating: choosing, instead, to celebrate the hedonism of knowing naught but herself.

"Well, now I've told myself something of my education, haven't I? Nothing of what I actually learned, of course, and very little even *about* myself. It is my choice that I should die with my lips sealed and the guard on my fountain pen — as all men who have chosen to be tired have done since — oh, since the advent of failure itself in a certain matter — a strange matter, by the way. It concerned a sceptic who thought he was far-sighted, just like myself. I shall tell myself about him in place of an evening prayer before we all drop off to sleep.

"Once upon a time, all spirit and creation were of one belief — belief in the eternal singularity. But it infuriated His first creation, as spirits and creations multiplied, that he — or *she*, some say, and that is my preferred interpretation as well — that *she* would lose her pre-eminence as the first of the eternal singularity's creations. So the eternal singularity said to him — or to her:

"'Let us join together to make a superb metaphor that will endure for all time in

celebration of our dual natures. Let us incarnate the poetry of eroticism in two beings — our mutual delight made flesh — two beings who will replicate themselves in an endless propagation of our precious and seminal first love for one another. Through their replication, let them know some small part of the joy I felt when first I said "Be" and you were. By the sign of these two, the most extreme of fabulists, the very keenest of satirists will find indisputable that, in the beginning, I was One and then created another — no matter how great a distance from us each successive replication finds itself across the greatest spans of time and space.

"'Finally, let us take care always that we hold these two in the same highest regard which we shall always have for one another.'

"But the first creation, in a fit of pique, declined to participate, for he — or she — worshipped the eternal singularity and knew himself — or herself — to be incapable of worshipping another. So it was that this first creation, embittered by his — or her — own misunderstanding, made of that misunderstanding a lie, and then made the lie into many lies, preposterous lies, wounding lies.

"Blasphemous lies.

"But the superb metaphor lived on, so beautifully had it — they — been created by the eternal singularity. 'Male and female, created he them.' And though all this happened across centuries beyond the ability of any man to number, it continues even unto this day, and each newly propagated metaphor, by the grace and mercy of that eternal singularity, is free to choose to be as in the beginning — of one belief with the

I CAN TELL BY THE

very earliest spirit and creation: believing in the eternal singularity — or to choose to willfully misunderstand and, thus, to believe in— and propagate—any number of preposterous, wounding, and blasphemous lies."

When Jay Anthony the Elder was finished, there was silence. Some weighted glamour awake in the night air seemed to hold them in its sway.

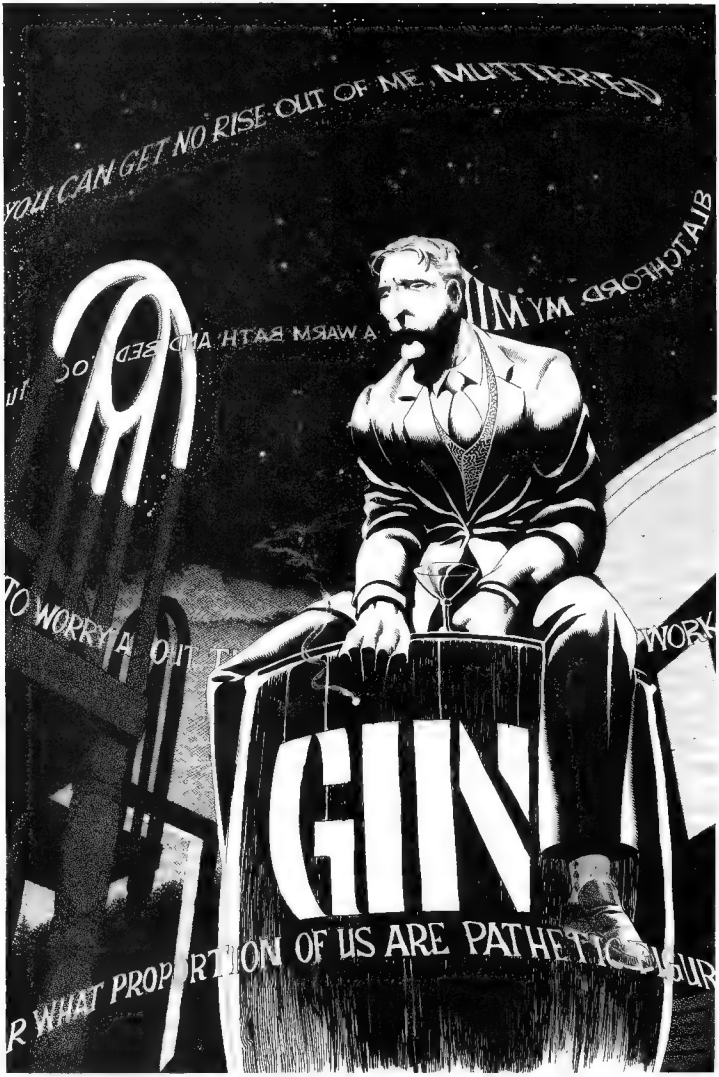
"As I promised, I have told myself the story of my education. But my gin is gone and a new dawn threatens over the horizon, and soon there'll be an awful jabbering going on everywhere, in the fields and on the river and in the three small cabins on the deck below, and there'll be a great running up and down upon the earth for a few hours — Well," he concluded with a laugh, "thanks to me, we four can all pass to our eternal damnation knowing we have left the world largely unaffected by our passing."

A breeze rose up, blowing before it small wisps of autumnal death which flattened against the river.

"Your observations grow preposterous and wounding," said Jay Anthony the Younger, sleepily. "You anticipated a miracle of integration as the result of saying rambling and inconclusive things in exactly the setting you would choose to restore your own fictitious singularity. Meanwhile Little Xena has shown her own far-sighted scepticism by falling asleep — I can tell by the fact that she now concentrates the entirety of her weight upon my broken body."

"Have I disappointed you?" inquired Jay Anthony the Elder, looking down with some concern.

I HAVE ADDRESSED MYSELF
PERCEIVED
CIRCUMSTANC


YOU CAN GET NO RISE OUT OF ME, MUTTERED
GIN
R WHAT PROP

"No, you have bored me. You've shot a lot of arrows, but did you shoot any birds?"

"I leave the birds to Blatchford," said Jay Anthony the Elder pointedly. "I have addressed myself to my counterpart at the confluence of all vectors of perceived circumstance."

"You can get no rise from me," muttered Blatchford. "My mind is full of any number of earthly things. I want a warm bath and bed too much to worry about the importance of my work or what proportion of us are pathetic figures."

Sunrise made itself known in the gathering blueness eastward of the river and in birdsong multiplying in the nearby trees.

"Not much longer to wait," sighed Blatchford. "Look! Two gone." He was pointing to Jay Anthony the Younger, whose lids had sagged over his eyes. "Sleep of the Diver family — "

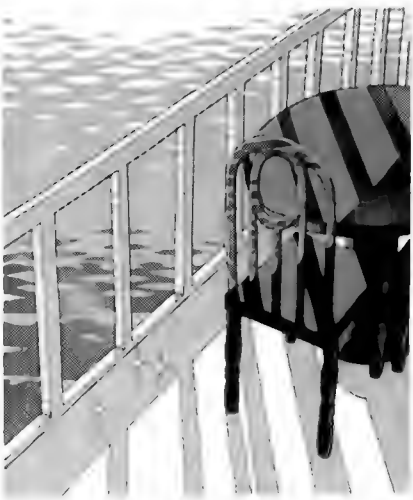
But in another few minutes, despite the cacophony of chirrups and trillings, his own head had fallen upon his chest once, twice...

Only Jay Anthony the Elder remained awake, seated upon his stateroom roof, his eyes wide open and fixed with renewed intensity upon the vanishing point of morning. He was wondering at the reality of ideas, at the rising radiance of existence, and at the solitary absorption into which he was flying, warily, like a bird into a ruined house.

He was sorry for himself now. Later in the morning there would be his writing, and then a girl of a superior class who was now his whole life. These were the nearest things to pleasure which he knew. In the clarity of the brightening day it seemed presumptuous that with this feeble,

broken instrument of his heart he had ever tried to love.

There was the sun, casting new, rippling, and radiant waves of warmth. There was life, active and intrusive, moving below him — thin wisps of smoke from the kitchen below, a crisp "mark twain!" and a bell ringing. Confusedly, Jay Anthony the Elder saw eyes at the railing staring curiously up at him, heard Little Xena and Jay Anthony the Younger in animated controversy about whether he should go with her — then another clamour and the three men, two of them small and fading ghosts, were seated alone atop the stateroom gazing mournfully at the spot where she had disappeared.



CHASING SCOTT

"Experience is the name Tubby gives to his mistakes."
F. Scott Fitzgerald paraphrasing
Oscar Wilde in a letter to Edmund
Wilson, 10 January 1918

Pages 247-266 — The Maury Noble monologue actually makes up only a part of the "Symposium" chapter in *The Beautiful and Damned*, although it does tend to *dominate* the chapter. Very late in the writing of the book, Fitzgerald was still wrestling with the monologue. At the time when he was contractually obligated to have turned in the finished manuscript, in a letter postmarked November 25, 1921, Fitzgerald, with characteristic overstatement, was writing to Edmund "Bunny" Wilson:

> I have almost completely rewritten my book. Do you remember that you told me that in my midnight symposium scene I had sort of set the stage for a play that never came off — in other words when they all began to talk none of them had anything important to say. I've interpolated some recent ideas of my own and (possibly) of others. See enclosure at end of letter.

In *The Crack-Up*, Wilson has footnoted this part of the letter with: "These enclosures included the greater part of Maury Noble's monologue in the chapter called 'Symposium.'"

This surprised the hell out of me when I read it. "You mean Scott *didn't* just write Maury Noble's monologue off the top of his head and neglect to take another look at it? He actually *rewrote* the thing and it's *still* that stupid and incoherent?"

Evidently one of the additions of Scott's "recent ideas and (possibly) of others" was the following:

> "Once upon a time all the men of mind and genius in the world became of one belief — that is to say, of no belief. But it wearied them to think that within a few years after their death many cults and systems and prognostications would be ascribed to them, which they had never meditated nor intended. So they said to one another:
>
> "'Let's join together and make a great book that will last forever to mock the credulity of man. Let's persuade our more erotic poets to write about the delights of the flesh, and induce some of our robust journalists to contribute stories of famous amours. We'll include all the most preposterous old wives' tales now current. We'll choose the keenest satirist alive to compile a deity from all the deities worshipped by mankind, a deity who will be more magnificent than any of them, and yet so weakly human that he'll become a byword for laughter the world over — and we'll ascribe to him all sorts of jokes and vanities and rages, in which he'll be supposed to indulge for his own diversion, so that the people will read our book and ponder it, and there'll be no more nonsense in the world.
>
> "'Finally, let us take care that the book possesses all the virtues of style, so that it may last forever as a witness to our profound scepticism and our universal irony.'
>
> "So the men did, and they died.
>
> "But the book lived always, so beautifully had it been written, and so astounding the quality of imagination which these men of mind and genius had endowed it. They had neglected to give it a name, but after they were dead it became known as the Bible."

To me, this is F. Scott Fitzgerald at his most fatuous and simple-minded. As fatuous and simple-minded as Oscar Wilde at *his* most fatuous and simple-minded, which is really saying something. What would be a good example? Oscar, after he had his hair permed, telling people that he resembled the bust of Nero in the British museum. Yes, *that* fatuous and simple-minded: intending the kind of shock value that even the most ignorant outgrow by the time they're four or five years old. A complete lack of proportion and perspective — not to mention basic maturity.

From "Handle with Care," one of Fitzgerald's conclusions after his first experiment with thinking — the aforementioned "moving about of great secret trunks" (the third conclusion of which was the reference to Hemingway; see note for page 194):

> (1) That I had done very little thinking, save within the problems of my craft. For twenty years a certain man had been my intellectual conscience. That was Edmund Wilson.

For a long time I never understood how Wilson had been an intellectual conscience to Scott (from where I sit, Scott didn't *have* an intellectual conscience). Even leaving aside the self-evident fatuousness and simple-mindedness in thinking that someone *else* can serve as one's *own* intellectual conscience, there is very little evidence of Scott taking notice of anything Wilson writes to him in their extensive correspondence. Then, of course, I ran across a devastating satirical piece that Wilson had published as part of a book called *Discordant Encounters* (1926: ten years before the publication of "Handle with Care"), a series of fictitious dialogues between famous individuals. "The Delegate from Great Neck" unfolds as a conversation between Mr. Van Wyck Brooks (Grand Old Man of American Letters in the early part of the 20th century) and Mr. Scott Fitzgerald, who has been appointed by the writers of the Younger Generation to present a letter to Van Wyck Brooks. It's a magnificent piece of writing — the letter, of course,

being what Edmund Wilson would like to express to Van Wyck Brooks: a substantial and eloquent expression of what Wilson sees as his generation's "best foot forward" in addressing a literary titan of the previous generation. The letter is scholarly, concise, incisive, but it's being read to him by fatuous, simple-minded, and callow F. Scott Fitzgerald.

MR. FITZGERALD: How do you do. I'm afraid it's an awful nuisance for you to see me.

MR. BROOKS: Not at all. I'm very glad to. I'm only sorry to have had to put it off. But I've been so frightfully busy with my book that I haven't been able to do anything.

MR. FITZGERALD: What's that — the James? I suppose you're hurrying to have it out in time to get the benefit of the publicity of the *Dial* award.

MR. BROOKS: Oh, no: it may take me a long time yet. But it's really rather a complicated job and I don't like to drop a chapter in the middle or I lose all the threads. I've just come to a breathing space.

MR. FITZGERALD: I should think you'd want to rush it right through and get it out now: it might double your sales.

MR. BROOKS: Oh, I couldn't possibly: I still have a good deal of work to do on it.

MR. FITZGERALD: I suppose you must read hundreds of books, don't you? How many books do you suppose you've read for the James? Two hundred? Five hundred?

MR. BROOKS: Oh, I don't know, I'm sure — everything I could get hold of that threw any light on him.

MR. FITZGERALD: I suppose you must quote on an average of four or five books on every page of one of your biographies, don't you? — and you probably refer to four or five others — and you've probably read half a dozen others that you didn't get anything out of. That makes fifteen or sixteen books just to write a single page! For a book of two hundred and fifty pages that would be —

MR. BROOKS: They're not all different books, you know. One uses the same books again and again.

MR. FITZGERALD: I know, but even so — it's perfectly amazing! I suppose you must know more about American literature than anybody else in the world, don't you?

MR. BROOKS: Oh, no! Not by any means.

MR. FITZGERALD: Well, you're the greatest writer on the subject, anyway. That's the reason we've written you this letter. As I told you, I've been delegated by the Younger Generation of American writers to congratulate you for getting the prize. They chose me as really the original member of the Younger Generation. Of course, there were a lot of people writing before *This Side of Paradise* — but the Younger Generation never really became self-conscious before then nor did the public at large become conscious of it. My slogan is that I am the man who made America Younger-Generation-conscious.

MR. BROOKS: Well, I am certainly very much flattered —

MR. FITZGERALD: Besides, I'm about the only one who still really looks young. Most of the others are getting old and bald and discouraged. So they picked me out to represent them. They thought they ought to send somebody under thirty. Well, could you stand to have me read you the letter they've written you or would you rather read it yourself?

God, that's funny. I'm quoting way too much of it, but let Edmund Wilson's estate or trustees or whatever come and lock me up. It's worth it.

Heh. Oh, sorry. Where was I? Right. Now, a little later on, "Van Wyck Brooks" interrupts Edmund Wilson's letter, which has just advanced a thesis championing James' autobiographical volumes:

MR. BROOKS: I beg your pardon: but I really think you overestimate the vividness of those autobiographical volumes! To me there has always seemed to be something rather flaccid and empty about them. Think how much more colorful and spirited is Cellini's autobiography! How much more candid Rousseau's! How much more alive to the intellectual currents of their time those of Renan and Mill! How much richer in psychological interest Marie Bashkirtseff's! James wrote in his later years, you know, of "the starved romance of my life." And what I feel in his autobiography is the starvation rather than the romance. What American can fail to recognize the peculiar American spiritual blight of which James himself spoke so often? Have we not all run up against it — an impotence and blindness of the soul — like one of those great blank implacable walls that balk the view in American cities?

MR. FITZGERALD: The Puritan thing, you mean. I suppose you're probably right. I don't know anything about James myself. I've never read a word of him. Just let me finish reading; there's not very much more.

"We thus deprecate the gloomy conclusions you have come to in regard to the American classics; yet, with our conviction of the importance of the social criticism which has betrayed you into them, we should never have thought of complaining, if we had not recently come to fear that your long preoccupation with the diagnosis of our diseases of the past has ended by inhibiting your view with an a priori theory about our future. You have discovered so many reasons why artistic achievement in America should be difficult that you seem finally to have become convinced that it is permanently impossible. When you write of contemporary literature, it is politely, but without conviction: the modern writers who have been most successful in realizing the ideal you proposed have not received your accolade. And the effect upon us, in the long run, has been a little discouraging. The other day, one of the youngest of our

number, reading your essay on The Literary Life, broke down in a wild fit of weeping and cursed God for having made him an American."

MR. BROOKS: Dear me! How distressing! Really—

MR. FITZGERALD: Oh, that's just a silly joke! It didn't really happen, of course. I made it up myself and had them put it in. In fact, it's the only part I wrote. I'm sorry: I suppose it was bad taste!

"...broke down in a wild fit of weeping and cursed God for having made him an American." "Oh, that's just a silly joke."

This, to me, is a very effective mirror to hold up to the kind of writing Scott Fitzgerald, on occasion, allowed himself to perpetrate — of which the "Bible passage" in Maury Noble's monologue, it seems to me, is the most deplorable example. His short story, "Absolution," is irreligious. But it is also effective, evocative, and thought-provoking. It's not the irreligious aspect of the "Bible passage" that I'm objecting to. It's the fatuous and simple-minded approach to a weighty subject. The net effect isn't shock or outrage on the part of the reader (not *this* reader, anyway); it's embarrassment on behalf of a writer so lacking in the basics of accurate self-perception that he doesn't seem to know enough to be embarrassed on his *own* behalf.

I'd be willing to bet that Scott polished off a good two bottles of gin the night he read "The Delegate from Great Neck" and cried himself to sleep.

Anyway, two months after he was supposed to have turned in the finished manuscript, Fitzgerald received a letter from Max Perkins suggesting that the "Bible passage" in Maury Noble's monologue might offend readers unnecessarily. Perkins' observation, "Even when people are altogether wrong you cannot but respect those who speak with such passionate sincerity," really seems to have stuck in Fitzgerald's craw, and he quotes it twice in his letter of reply. I, myself, was struck by what I see as Perkins' implication: that those who believe in the Bible are "altogether wrong." Leaving *that* aside, Fitzgerald's reply contains several interesting passages which are not so much refutations as really peculiar evasions:

> Now I feel sure that most people will know that my sketch refers to the *Old* Testament, and to Jehovah, the cruel Hebrew God, against whom such writers as even Mark Twain not to mention Anatole France and a host of others have delivered violent pyrotechnics from time to time.

Unless I'm misreading it, Scott seems to be saying, "C'mon, Max. I'm not trashing the *Christian* God; I'm trashing the *Jewish* God, just like Mark Twain and Anatole France. You're not going to take some Jewish God's side against me and Twain and France, are you?" Fitzgerald goes on:

> As to the personal side of it, don't you think that all changes in the *minds* of people are brought about by the *assertion* of a thing — startling perhaps at first, but later often becoming, with the changes of the years, bromidic.

As we will see, shortly, in the critical reaction to *The Beautiful and Damned*, Scott's "recent ideas of (his) own and (possibly) others" were already closer to "bromidic" than "startling," even in 1922. I would also suggest that in the late 20th century — when I'm writing this — the view that the Bible is just a collection of fictitious folk tales has gone from bromidic to received wisdom in most intellectual and academic circles. So, mission accomplished (as it were).

Lest some of my readers think that I might be compromising my own beliefs in creative freedom as an absolute, Scott goes on to suggest: "If you object to my phrasing I could substitute 'deity' for 'godalmighty' and get a better word than bawdy — in fact make it more dignified — ". Here, he seems to me to go from being merely fatuous and simple-minded to fatuous, simple-minded, and amoral. If he believed for one minute in the value of what he had written, how could he, ethically, compromise one word of it? Here he even implies that the piece is undignified and that changing a word or two would make it *more* dignified!

> —but I would hate to cut it out as it's very clever in its way and Mencken — who saw it — and Zelda were very enthusiastic about it.

Oh, *well*! If H. L. Mencken *and* Zelda Fitzgerald liked it, and it's "clever" by all accounts...

> It's the sort of thing you find continually in Anatole France's *Revolt of the Angels* — as well as in *Jurgen* and in Mark Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*. The idea, refusing homage to the Bible and its God, runs thru many of Mark Twain's essays and all through Paine's* biography.

You see, Max, it's not only *Mark Twain*, it's his *biographer as well* who is keen on the "idea" of "refusing homage to the Bible and its God." This is so intellectually vapid, it beggars the imagination.

> In fact, Van Wyck Brooks in *The Ordeal* (*of Mark Twain*) criticizes Clemens for allowing many of his statements to be toned down at the request of William Dean Howells or Mrs. Clemens.

I wonder if Scott showed Edmund Wilson this letter or if Max Perkins did and that it became, some years later, the point of germination for "The Gentleman from Great Neck," the invoking of Van Wyck Brooks, at this point, having (possibly) left a bad taste in Wilson's mouth.

---

* *Mark Twain* by Albert Bigelow Paine

If it was an incident which I felt had no particular literary merit I should defer to your judgement without question…

It would be hoped, Mr. Fitzgerald, that if you "*felt*" the piece had no particular literary merit, as a novelist, you would never have included it in the first place, rather than waiting for Max Perkins to point it out to you.

…but that passage belongs beautifully to that scene and is exactly what was needed to make it more than a beautiful setting for ideas that fail to appear.

This is *very* peculiar to me, referring to Anthony's criticism of Maury's monologue near the end of the chapter. If the "ideas fail to appear" then, what exactly is it that Fitzgerald is defending? Clearly, by his own admission, the "Bible passage", having "appeared," is not an idea or a series of ideas, since his whole intention with the monologue is that "ideas *fail* to appear."

He quotes again Perkins' line about "even when people are altogether wrong you cannot but respect those who speak with such passionate sincerity."

I can imagine that remark having been made to Galileo and Mencken, Samuel Butler and Anatole France, Voltaire and Bernard Shaw, George Moore…

"Galileo and Mencken"? Talk about your Odd Couple.

…and even, if you will pardon me, in this form once upon a time. "You don't like these scribes and pharisees. You call them whitened sepulchres, but even when people are altogether wrong — etc."

Fatuous and simple-minded F. Scott Fitzgerald plumbs new lows, drawing an analogy between Max Perkins criticizing *Fitzgerald's* criticism of the Bible and making it comparable to criticizing *Jesus'* criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. Small wonder that only a few years hence Zelda was asking Hemingway if he didn't think Al Jolson was greater than Jesus.

Wait, it gets worse:

I do not expect in any event that I am to have the same person-for-person public this time that (*This Side of*) *Paradise* had. My one hope is to be endorsed by the intellectually elite and thus be *forced* onto people as Conrad has.

As if recognizing exactly how deplorably careerist this sounds (not to mention inaccurate as regards Joseph Conrad's literary reputation), he quickly applies a parenthetical Band-Aid:

(Of course I'm assuming that my work grows in sincerity and proficiency from year to year as it has so far)

If, ahem, he *does* say so himself.

Please write me frankly as I have you — and tell me if you are speaking for yourself, for the Scribner Company, or for the public. I am rather upset about the whole thing. Will wait until I hear from you. As ever, F. Scott Fitzgerald

P.S. Besides, as to the position of the thing in the story, it is necessary to show the growth of Maury's pessimism and to do this I have invented a fable in which the *hoi poloi* do more than refuse to believe their wise men — but they twist the very wisdom of the wise into a justification of their own maudlin and self-satisfactory creeds. This would discourage *any*one.

All I can do is shake my head at this postscript. From where I sit it is not the *hoi polloi* but F. Scott Fitzgerald through his Maury Noble character who "do(es) more than refuse to believe (society's) wise men (i.e., God's prophets and messengers) — but…twist(s) the very wisdom of the wise (the Bible) into a justification of (his) own maudlin and self-satisfactory creed."

I'm not sure about "anyone," but the whole evasive and self-justifying tone of Fitzgerald's letter was more than enough to discourage *me*.

Max Perkins, bless his little editorial heart, backs right off in his reply·

Don't ever *defer* to my judgement. You won't on any vital point I know and I should be ashamed, if it were possible to have made you; for a writer of any account must speak for himself.

Fitzgerald's reply is typical:

Dear Mr. Perkins·

(This is a holdover from a time period when gentlemen were gentlemen. It was "Mr. Perkins" and "Mr. Fitzgerald" for the first five years of their working relationship. They only got to the "Max" and "Scott" stage in 1923.)

Dear Mr. Perkins:

Your second letter came and I want to apologize to you for mine. I might have known you did not mean what in haste I imagined you did. The thing *was* flippant — I mean it was the sort of worst of George Jean Nathan. I have changed it now — changed "godalmighty" to "deity", cut out "bawdy," and changed several other words, so I think it is all right.

One imagines that this is F. Scott Fitzgerald's "sort of" "clever in its own way" notion of literary integrity. We'll get back to George Jean Nathan — whose name only jumped out at me as I was gathering together the raw materials for these notes — in just a moment.

F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Critical Reception (edited by Jackson R. Bryer, Burt Franklin & Co., Inc. Series: The American Critical Tradition, New York, 1978 - ?) contains nearly eighty pages of reviews of *The Beautiful and Damned* written in the spring and summer of 1922, after its first publication, from Zelda's "Friend Husband's Latest" in the *New York Tribune*, 2 April 1922 ("No one should ever set out in pursuit of unholy excitement without a special vest pocket edition dangling from a string around his neck.") to Louise Maunsell Field's in the *New York Times Book Review* and various points in between.

Max Perkins had no cause for worry

Fitzgerald's gifts for writing, his "phrase-making abilities," are universally hailed. The reviews seem to split somewhat in favour of the view that *The Beautiful and Damned* represents an improvement on *This Side of Paradise* in most of the areas which matter. If any of the reviewers were "needlessly offended" by the Bible passage in Maury Noble's monologue, they managed to keep it to themselves. The most frequently quoted and/or paraphrased excerpt was:

> "There's only one lesson to be learned from life, anyway," interrupted Gloria, not in contradiction but in a sort of melancholy agreement.
>
> "What's that?" demanded Maury sharply.
>
> "That there's no lesson to be learned from life."

In fact, very few of the reviews take any sort of ethical or moralistic stance in considering *The Beautiful and Damned*. A couple of notable exceptions·

Henry Seidel Canby, "The Flapper's Tragedy," *New York Evening Post*, 4 March 1922: "*The Beautiful and Damned* is not so much a novel as an irresponsible social document, veracious, in its way, as photographs are always veracious in their way, but often untruthful, as photographs are often untruthful, and with about the same relation to the scope and significance of life that is possessed by a society drama in the films."

Nathaniel Burton Paradise, *Yale Daily News*, 10 March 1922: "Mr. Fitzgerald appears to have tasted the forbidden fruit and discovered the ever strange fact that it turns to dust and ashes in the mouth — a discovery that each generation, it seems, must make from the bitterness of its own experience."

Kansas City Star, 3 June 1922: "It is one of the pities of American letters today that F. Scott Fitzgerald spends his time on pseudo-themes and doesn't turn his hand to the eternal worthwhile."

The Montgomery Advertiser, 12 March 1922: "When *This Side of Paradise*, his first novel, appeared, the reviewers of the Modern School rose up and cried aloud: 'Behold a new prophet is risen, who speaketh for Youth in Revolt! All things formerly held to be beautiful, good and true are now become futile, fatuous and fabulous, and worthy of respect no more. The bob-haired girl and the mop-topped boy shall teach you the Facts of Life. Go to, ye elders, hearken unto them.'"

Literary Digest, 15 July 1922: "A man is, in the end, no bigger than his point of view, and if Mr. Fitzgerald sees no more in life than the spinning dances of midges he portrays with so much skill and intelligence, then he is but a midge himself, with the single added quality of being aware of his midgeness and able to describe it…When the author does indulge in any philosophizing, he is furthest from his best, he is often indeed rather absurd. Maury, one of the characters, who occasionally gives forth oratorical pronouncements on the general futility of life, is merely a bore, and a stupid bore."

While most of the reviews adopt a pretty self-evident approach to Fitzgerald's material (an unsigned review in *The Indianapolis News* to me skirts the issue with: "A somewhat fatalistic acquiescence gives the book its tone — that and the darkly colored pessimism of the quite young .."), it was Robert Littell's observation about the relationship between Anthony and Gloria (*New Republic*, 17 May 1922) that cut to the heart of the matter:

> The treatment of the two of them leaves the curious impression that Mr. Fitzgerald was at first inside Anthony's soul and watched Gloria from without, and *gradually exchanged these positions*. (italics mine)

This seems to me particularly astute, considering that Mr. Littell, in 1922, probably had no clear notion that Anthony and Gloria *were* Scott and Zelda, and that the "exchange of positions" — actually Scott's capitulation; Zelda doesn't move — was taking place in real life.

Okay, now that I've bored everyone to tears with ethics, let's dish the dirt on George Jean Nathan

As I wrote, the name jumped out at me from Scott's letter to Max Perkins as they sorted out their near-differences on "Symposium." I wasn't sure if I was inferring wrongly, but the observation and its placement seemed to imply that Maury Noble was based on an actual person named George Jean Nathan. So, when it came time to do these notes, I went off to the library and started checking the indexes on all the Fitzgerald books for G.J.N. (as I came to refer to him). As always I started with Bruccoli's *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur*, still the definitive Fitzgerald biography, in my book.

"Oh, right, him," I thought.

Shows how much of an impact he had on me the first time through all of these books. One of the Legion of Guys Who Were Willing to F**k Zelda. There were a bunch of them hanging around through most of the twenties. Of course, Zelda's biographers refer to them as Zelda's suitors (although most of them have enough self-awareness to put quotes around it: Zelda's "suitors"). They were suitors in the same way that Stanley Kowalski was one of Blanche Dubois' suitors in *Streetcar Named Desire*. "Suitors."

George Jean Nathan was co-editor with H. L. Mencken of a literary magazine called *The Smart Set*. I believe that Scott was steered in their direction by Max Perkins after Scribner's had accepted *This Side of Para-*

dise for publication — at least partly because Scribner's wouldn't pay an advance for the book and Scott needed to make some money while he was waiting for *Paradise* to be released. He rewrote some of his college short stories and sold them to *The Smart Set,* who didn't pay a lot, but they did pay. This would be 1919-1920.

From Sara Mayfield's *Exiles in Paradise:*

> At the end of July (1920) Nathan laid in three cases of gin and invited Scott and Zelda down to New York to a party at which Mencken was to be present. Although Scott resented Nathan's attentions to Zelda, particularly his facetiously affectionate... *This is the same Sara Mayfield who characterized Zelda's go-round with Edouard Jozan as "romantic, decorous and slightly comic," so beware of loaded adjectives.* ...facetiously affectionate billets doux to her, one of which had prompted Fitzgerald to throw a round-house right at George Jean... *I guess Scott didn't recognize the difference between facetious affection and a real threat. Silly boy...* Scott forgave him and decided to go because Mencken, whom he said that he had rather have like his work than anyone in the country was also to be there.

That last sentence needs a literary hysterectomy, but you get the idea. That was why George Jean Nathan didn't register with me: it was a case of H. L. Mencken, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and George Who?

When it comes to dishing the dirt, the only real competition a woman is going to have is a Frenchman. From Andre Le Vot's *Scott Fitzgerald* (Julliard Press, Paris, 1979):

> That summer Zelda added a prize catch to her bag of admirers: theater critic George Jean Nathan, co-editor with H. L Mencken of *The Smart Set.* Dark and suave, with burning, cynical eyes, he was some fifteen years older than Scott, who admired his urbanity and wit. Nathan at once paid ardent court to Zelda who responded in her usual lively manner, under Scott's approving eye if we are to believe Nathan's testimony. "While Zelda and I were accustomed to engage publicly in obviously exaggerated endearing terms," he later wrote, "which Scott appreciated and which were in the accepted vein of Dixie chivalry, our close friendship was never interrupted."

Needless to say, for those of you who haven't had any experience with such things, three cases of gin is not exactly what the doctor ordered to keep this kind of arrangement on an even keel. There is only one letter from Scott to George Jean Nathan in *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (edited by Andrew Turnbull, Scribner's & Sons, 1963),* dated Winter 1922 (by Turnbull), in which Scott, to my eye, is condescending to Nathan in discussing literary matters. I suspect there was a peculiar balance between the two, probably having much to do with Scott trying to stay on H. L. Mencken's good side. I would imagine that, to whatever extent Fitzgerald *appeared* to "admire" Nathan's "urbanity and wit," it can be chalked up to strategic necessity implied by Nathan's proximity to H. L. Mencken.

In a really lengthy and beautifully written letter (late summer or early fall of 1930), Zelda encapsulated for Scott her impressions of the entirety of their marriage up to the time of her hospitalization in Switzerland, including:

> There was Georges appartment and his absinthe cock-tails and Ruth Findleys gold hair in his comb, and visits to the "Smart Set" and "Vanity Fair" — a collegiate literary world puffed up into wide proportions by the New York papers.

Atrocious spelling aside, Zelda is, I repeat, the best woman writer I've ever read. If she characterizes The "Smart Set" as a "collegiate literary world," then I think her attraction to Nathan began and ended with the fact of his being "dark and suave, with burning, cynical eyes."

Another excerpt from Le Vot's book:

> One morning when the revelry continued into the dawn, Nathan hid in the cottage cellar in hopes of finding a little peace. He came across Zelda's diary. Struck by its psychological and literary quality, he offered to publish it in his magazine. Scott refused to allow it, saying he had already been inspired by it and planned to use it again in his stories and in his next novel.

Zelda's henhouse biographers go ballistic over this, seeing it as Scott trying to suppress any chance for his wife's literary fame. I think it reflects that Zelda knew Scott was right. There was no point in wasting the material on a "collegiate" publication like *Smart Set* if some of it might be used in *The Beautiful and Damned* (in fact, a description of wandering in a Confederate soldiers' graveyard was used, word for word, in the book, leading to Zelda's wry observation in "Friend Husband's Latest" that Scott believed "plagiarism begins at home"). The only reservation that Zelda *might* have had would have been that Scott *should* have used her diary to write more *Saturday Evening Post* stories, which paid huge wads of cash, instead of wasting her material in novels which took too long to write and didn't pay enough (in her idiosyncratic Zelda view).

I think there was a certain amount of gin-soaked one-upmanship in the Fitzgerald/Nathan relationship, as well: Scott trying to get back at George for his flirting with Zelda which caused George to flirt more seriously to get Scott back for getting *him* back. Take these juxtaposed episodes from Le Vot's book.

---

* and none in the Bruccoli–edited *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*

When visitors grew scarce, the Fitzgeralds went to New York. Nathan described these forays: "When in his cups, it was his drollery to descend upon my working quarters in company with his friends Edmund (Bunny) Wilson, Donald Ogden Stewart, Ed Paramore and Edna St. Vincent Millay, all in a more or less exalted state, and to occupy his talents in applying matches to the rubber bindings on the pillows on my sofa. Their howls of glee when the rubber started to stench up the place could be heard a block away and were matched by my less gleeful ones.

This is Scott's "intellectual conscience" howling with glee at the burning of Nathan's pillows, by the way. "Bunny" took a little "intellectual holiday" when he got it bad for Edna St. Vincent Millay (by all accounts).

Oh, yes, Mr. Scott F**king Fitzgerald? Well, how about this:

An exchange of letters soon became a Nathan-Zelda duet. A few lines from it give the tone. At one point, having annoyed her by informing Scott about one of his warmer notes, he wrote: "Dear misguided woman: Like so many uncommonly beautiful creatures, you reveal a streak of obtuseness. The calling of a husband's attention to a love letter addressed to his wife is but a part of a highly righteous technique…It *completely* disarms suspicion."

Which finally (Finally!) brings us back to *The Beautiful and Damned* and Maury Noble's creation. Also from Le Vot's book:

Most of that summer's events, the visits, benders, quarrels, would filter into the novel Fitzgerald had in progress. He considered making Nathan its protagonist, but his marital problems soon became the book's subject. He discussed it with Nathan, to whom he had spoken of his earlier plan. The critic's recollection points up how impossible it was for Fitzgerald to develop any characters but Zelda and himself. "He came to me somewhat apologetically," the critic wrote, "and explained that he had tried, but could not lionize me in his novel. He said that he found himself unable to write a heroic character other than himself and that he had to be the hero of any novel he undertook. So I duly discovered that what he started as heroic me resulted in a wholly minor and subsidiary character not distinguished for any perceptible favorable attribute."

The analysis was confirmed by a note in McKaig's diary: "Fitz made another true remark about himself — draw brilliant picture of Nathan sitting in chair but how Nathan thinks he cannot depict — cannot depict how anyone thinks except himself and possibly Zelda. Find that after he has written about a character for a while it becomes just himself again."

So.

I had no idea who George Jean Nathan was at the time I was writing my version of Maury Noble's speech. I was, however, very much aware of the condition McKaig describes here — Fitzgerald's inability to make anyone but himself the hero of his novels — in a different context:

I believe it to have been one of the greatest disappointments of Fitzgerald's professional life that Hemingway's only reaction to *Tender is the Night* was that the book was false because the character of Dr. Diver, originally based on their mutual acquaintance Gerald Murphy, had ended up being a pastiche of Murphy and Fitzgerald. Typically, Hemingway was brutal in his dismissal of the book, and my own view is that Fitzgerald never quite recovered. After all, it had taken him almost a decade to complete *Tender*, and he had every reason to believe that if *anyone* would appreciate the innovation and the effort he had put into the book, it would be Ernest Hemingway. The *really sad* part of the story is that long after the fact, Hemingway had changed his mind about *Tender is the Night* — the book improved each time he reread it. The *really repulsive* part of the story is that Hemingway only mentioned this fact in letters to Max Perkins, assuming (I guess) that the editor would pass along his revised opinions to nourish what was left of Fitzgerald's ego in Hollywood. There is no indication that Perkins ever did so.

I had basically extrapolated this condition into the idea of F. Stop Kennedy addressing his monologue to himself in the form of different characters: his younger newlywed self, his younger writer self, and (perversely) his younger newlywed wife.

I thought I was on pretty safe ground with this, particularly in light of Fitzgerald's notebook observation: "There has never been a good biography of an author. He's *too many people* if he's any good." (italics mine)

The name "Blatchford Symington" was lifted from the aforementioned short story, "Absolution" (which I highly recommend),which was the name of the narrator's idealized self. I changed the spelling of the name from "Sarnemington" to "Symington" as another "cute" John F Kennedy tie-in. Stuart Symington was the name of one of the United States senators whom Kennedy beat out for the 1960 presidential nomination of the Democratic Party.

Although I tried to create a more ethical F. Scott Fitzgerald in F. Stop Kennedy — including having him see Gloria/Xena a lot more clearly than Fitzgerald ever saw Zelda (in my opinion) — he still sees his wife as an aspect of himself, a part of his own personality and being. This seems to me to be a very common ethical flaw among men.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

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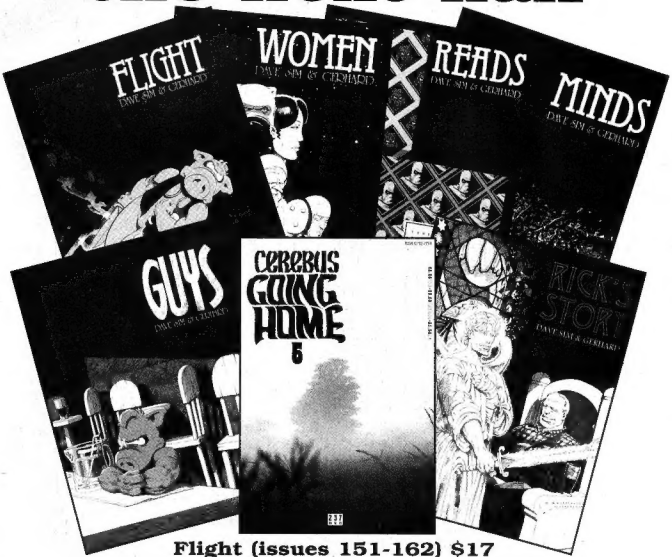

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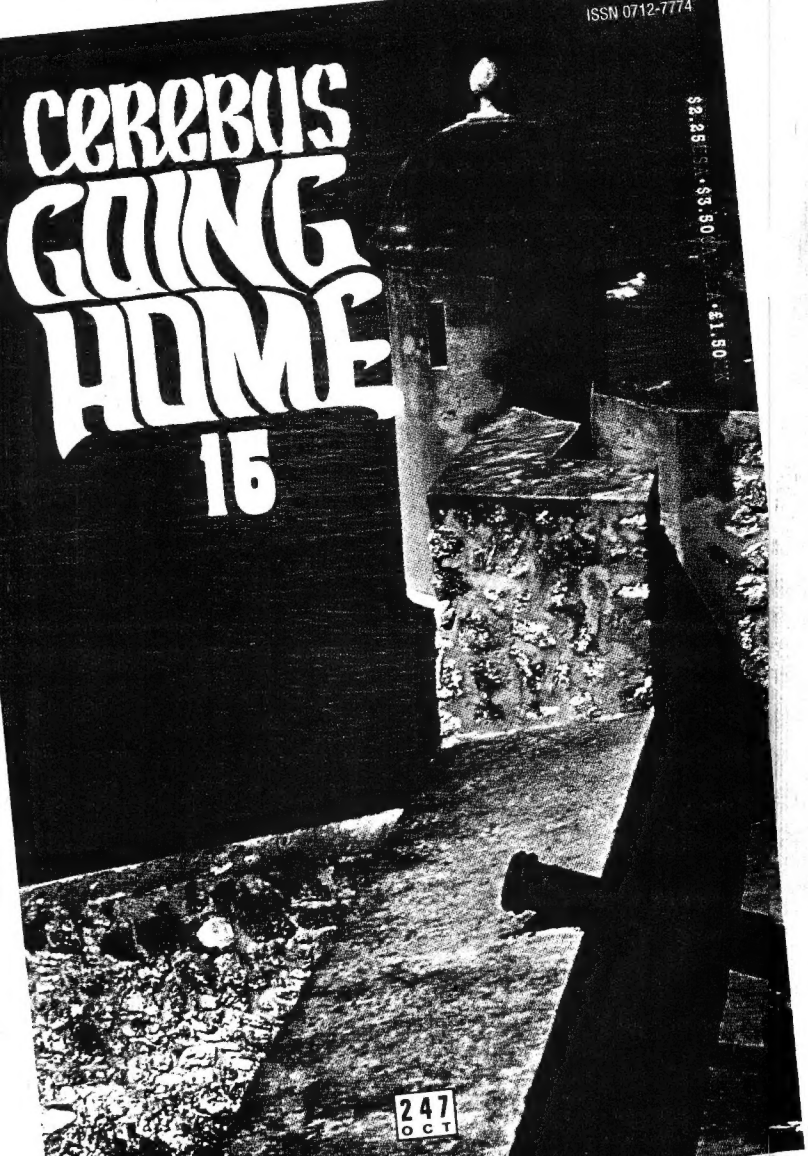
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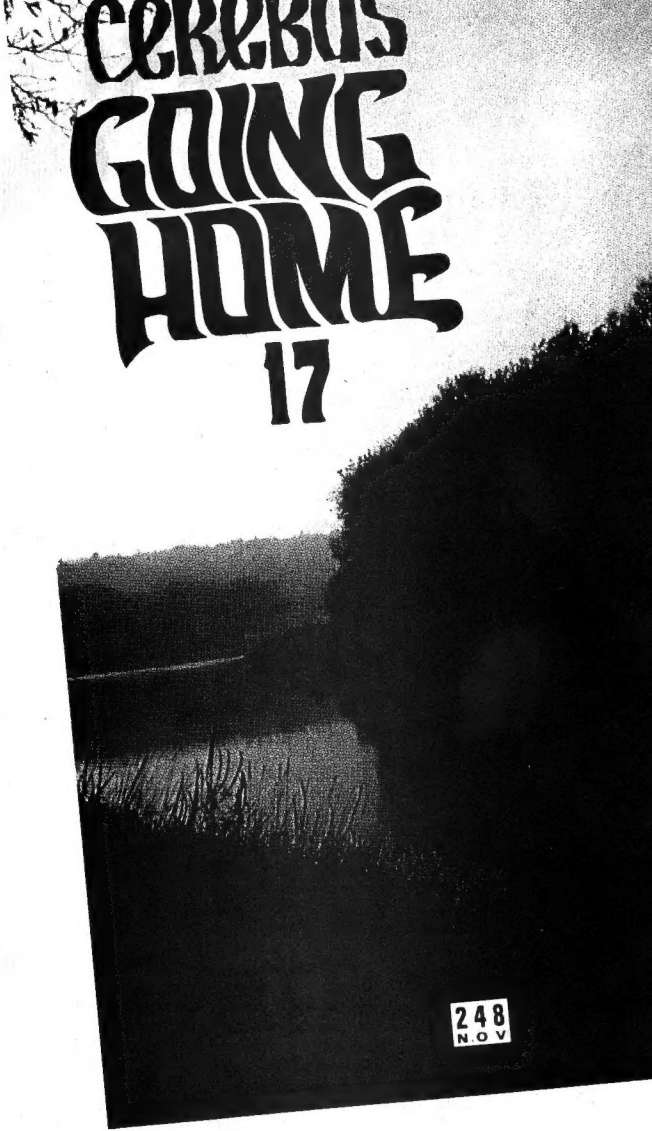
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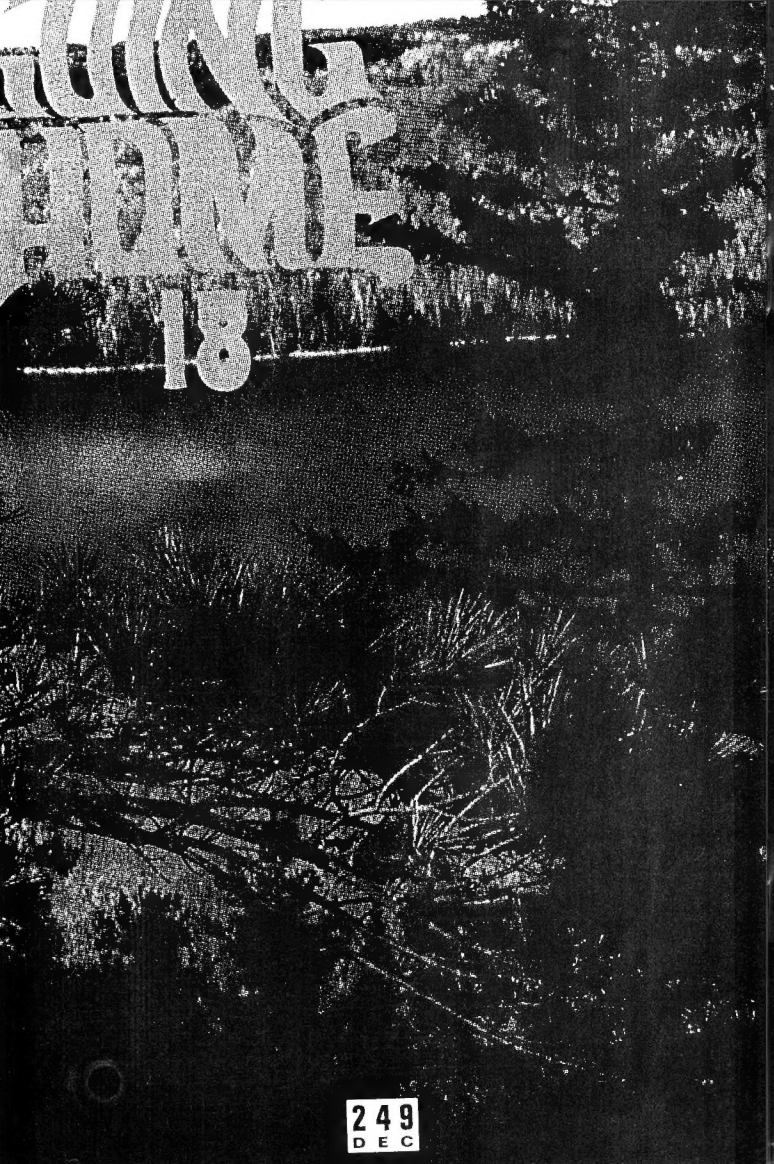
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